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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 003104

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/15/2017

TAGS: MARR PREL AF KS

SUBJECT: EAST ASIA DASSD SEDNEY'S MEETINGS IN SEOUL ON  
ALLIANCE, IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN

Classified By: DCM Bill Stanton. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: During meetings in Seoul on October 9-10, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense David Sedney met with U.S.-ROK Alliance counterparts in MOFAT and MND to discuss preparations for the visit of Secretary Gates for the November 6-7 Security Consultative Meeting. They also discussed the outcome of the October 2-4 North-South Summit and the ROK's plans to play a continuing role in Iraq and Afghanistan. MND Vice Minister Kim Young-ryoung assured DASSD Sedney and Special Advisor to the Secretary of Defense Richard Lawless, who joined in the meeting, that nothing discussed between the North and South Korean leaders would cause any problems for the U.S.-ROK Alliance. VM Kim said Defense Minister Kim Jang-soo looked forward to a very positive SCM with Secretary Gates, and stated he was unaware of any problematic issues the ROK would raise at that meeting. He said he was very satisfied with progress being made on the OPCON transition plan and agreed it would be advantageous to highlight that joint success at the SCM. Kim briefly mentioned an ROK request that Secretary Gates join the Defense Minister for a groundbreaking ceremony in Pyeongtaek.

¶2. (C) SUMMARY CON'T: On Iraq, VM Kim predicted that the ROK would reduce, but sustain, its Zaytun division deployment to Irbil through the end of 2008. In Afghanistan, he said it was the intent of the current ROK administration to propose a "PRT presence" for next year, but cautioned that the issue was a very sensitive one in South Korean domestic politics. Both he and his Director General for International Policy suggested it might be better if the PRT decision were postponed until after the South Korean presidential election in December. END SUMMARY.

¶3. (C) On October 9-10, 2007, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (DASSD) David Sedney met with key U.S.-ROK Alliance counterparts in MOFAT and MND to discuss preparations for the October 19 Security Policy Initiative alliance talks (SPI-15) and subsequent visit of Secretary Gates to the Republic of Korea for the November 6-7 Security Consultative Meeting (SCM). He also discussed with key Korean officials the outcome of the October 2-4 North-South Summit and the ROK's plans to play a continuing role in Iraq and Afghanistan beyond the end of this year. DASSD Sedney met with Vice Minister of National Defense Kim Young-ryoung, MOFAT Director

General for North American Affairs Cho Byung-jae, and MND Director General for International Policy Song Bong-heon. Richard Lawless, the Special Advisor to the Secretary of Defense for Alliance Transformation, accompanied him to the meeting with MND Vice Minister Kim.

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MND Reassuring on Outcomes North-South Summit  
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¶4. (C) In their October 9 meeting, Vice Minister Kim told DASD Sedney and Special Advisor Lawless that from the view of the Ministry of National Defense there was good progress at the October 2-4 North-South Summit. Kim assured that nothing in the discussions between the North and South Korean leaders was problematical for the U.S.-ROK Alliance, and promised that the ROK was ready to discuss any issues from the meetings with the North that the U.S. might find to be of concern. Asked about the timing and modalities of the North-South Defense Ministerial scheduled for November (to discuss implementation of agreements reached at the N-S Summit), Vice Minister Kim said no firm date was yet set. He stated that the North-South Prime Minister-level meeting would be held first and would discuss, among other topics, the joint fishing proposal and the dredging of the Han River estuary. It was his "wild guess" that the PM-level meeting would establish a framework for implementation of these initiatives, while the N-S Defense Ministerial would work out the necessary military measures. He added that it was his understanding that the elements of that framework were still very much the subject of internal ROKG discussions.

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DEFMIN Kim Looking Forward to a Very Positive SCM  
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¶5. (C) All of the MOFAT and MND interlocutors said they anticipated a positive and trouble-free set of Military and Security Consultative Meetings (MCM/SCM). VM Kim assured his visitors that he was unaware of any problematic or last minute issues the ROK would seek to raise at the SCM. He said the Defense Minister would provide some "explanatory views" to Secretary Gates concerning the outcome of the North-South Summit and other matters. Welcoming that assurance, DASD Sedney looked forward to the October 19 SPI discussions to help set the agenda for a successful SCM.

¶6. (C) Special Advisor Lawless said his OSD and USFK counterparts reported that solid progress was being made on the OPCON transition plan and suggested that the Secretary would most likely want to highlight that progress. He asked how satisfied VM Kim was with progress on OPCON transition. Kim replied that he was very satisfied, noting that smooth and steady progress had been made ever since Defense Minister Kim's meeting with Secretary Gates on the subject last February. He said he thought it would be mutually advantageous if the SCM were used to highlight that joint success.

¶7. (C) Although he did not press for it in this meeting, VM Kim did mention the ROK idea that it would be useful for the Secretary of Defense and Defense Minister Kim to hold a

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ground-breaking ceremony at the new USFK headquarters construction site in Pyeongtaek.

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Academics on OPCON Transfer and Future of Alliance  
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¶8. (C) In several conversations with military-related academics and intellectuals, Sedney and Lawless heard suggestions that in the event of a Presidential victory by the opposition, there would be a strong push by retired generals and others to try and reverse the decision on transfer of OPCON. When they pointed out to them the

benefits for the long-term future of the alliance and explained how OPCON transfer is seen as a positive step forward by Washington (including by many in the U.S. Congress), as well as by a number of the younger generation in Korea, these thinkers began to re-examine their analysis. They noted how attempts at reversal of the OPCON decision could negatively impact U.S. perceptions of Korea. Such a demand would erode the important signal of the maturity of the ROK military and of U.S. confidence in the ROK that the OPCON transfer decision represented.

¶9. (C) Also during these conversations Sedney and Lawless heard concerns that, on both sides of the alliance, there needed to be more, and wider, discussion and thinking about the future of the alliance. If the Six-Party Talks resulted in reduced tensions on the Peninsula, what would be the strategic drivers for the alliance, they posited. What role would Korea play in a region dominated by bigger countries - Japan, China, and Russia? Several of those they talked to saw a strong need for a continued alliance with the U.S. for the benefit not just of Korea, but also for regional peace and stability.

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Continued ROK Presence in Iraq and Afghanistan  
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¶10. (C) Raising U.S. concerns over the ROK handling of the Korean hostage situation in Afghanistan in August, Special Advisor Lawless asked the Vice Minister of Defense what impact he thought it would have on South Korea's future position in Afghanistan. Deflecting the question, VM Kim replied that the MND fully appreciated the U.S. concerns. He then went on to discuss what the ROKG would likely propose to the National Assembly in late October regarding South Korea's future role in Iraq and Afghanistan.

¶11. (C) In Iraq, VM Kim predicted that the ROK would propose to reduce, but sustain, its Zaytun division deployment to Irbil through the end of 2008. In Afghanistan, he said it was the intent of the current ROK administration to propose a

"PRT presence" after its troops were withdrawn as scheduled at the end of this year. He said MND would proceed very cautiously with the National Assembly on this matter because it was a very sensitive political issue. For that reason MND was currently engaged in informal discussions with key National Assembly members, Kim explained. Even if a small number of Korean soldiers were included in the ROKG proposal, it would require the approval of the National Assembly, Kim continued, adding that a vote would have to be scheduled prior to that legislative body's November 23 adjournment.

¶12. (C) VM Kim said that in his opinion it would be possible for the ROK to go ahead and staff the hospital in Bagram with civilians by the end of this year, so it could continue operating in 2008, while addressing the tougher political issue of the ROK role in a PRT sometime after the South Korean presidential election in December. He cautioned, however, that while the South Korean government would think about that approach, it would first need to carefully consider how best to package its Afghanistan proposal for consideration by the National Assembly.

¶13. (C) In a breakfast meeting with DASD Sedney the next morning, MND International Cooperation Division Director General Song Bong-heon raised the United Kingdom's recent public announcement that it would withdraw 1500 troops from Iraq by the spring. Song also laid out the timetable for presenting to the National Assembly an Iraq deployment extension and Afghanistan provincial reconstruction team (PRT) proposal. He was confident that the National Assembly would make a decision on the Iraq proposal before they went into recess, but emphasized that the specific details of the proposal would take shape after the ROKG survey team returned from Iraq in the coming days.

¶14. (C) Regarding Korean participation in an Afghanistan

PRT, Song proposed a military component of about 30 ROK soldiers to provide security for the Bagram-deployed ROK civilians manning the medical clinic and the PRT, along with a similar number to provide security for the Korean embassy in Kabul. Song wondered if some of those military personnel could also be medical staff operating in an advisory capacity. He reiterated that the specific make-up of any proposed ROK PRT would be predicated on the results of the survey.

¶15. (C) DASD Sedney advised that the survey team may hear from Coalition military members that any ROK contingent deployed to Afghanistan in the future would need to accept international standard operating procedures and guidelines. Specifically, these would include rejection of any payment of ransom for hostages. Sedney pointed out that the Taliban were now more likely to perceive ROK citizens as hostage targets, given the widespread perception that the ROK had paid a ransom. Song responded with claims that statements made in the press last month accusing the ROK of paying ransom to the Taliban kidnappers only encouraged the Taliban to test that accusation. He further added that the ROKG would need to be careful regarding any public statements on this issue in light of the upcoming South Korean presidential election.

¶16. (C) In contrast to a quick decision on Iraq, Song predicted that the National Assembly could delay a decision on the Afghan PRT until a later date when the political environment might be more supportive of the notion. Song closed the discussion by emphasizing the issue of ROK participation in Iraq and Afghanistan were not just issues for the US-ROK Alliance, but larger symbols of Korean burdensharing in world affairs, as well as points of national pride for South Korea as one of the world's leading economic powers.

¶17. (U) Special Advisor Lawless and DASD Sedney have cleared this message.

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